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## The stories 'Oppenheimer' didn't tell

By

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As a trained historian of science, I'm appalled that "Oppenheimer" won best picture. It's a truism that history is written by its winners, and this film is no exception.

The narrative in "Oppenheimer" was established in a crafty piece of propaganda published by the military only days after the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. "Atomic Energy for Military Purposes," known today as the Smyth Report after its author, Princeton University physicist and military adviser Henry DeWolf Smyth, focuses on all the clever scientific achievements of Smyth's physicist friends at the expense of a more expansive story.

Both "Oppenheimer" and the Smyth Report say little about the process of uranium enrichment. For a propaganda report, that omission was understandable: That process was the true secret of nuclear weapon-making, as we see today in concern over uranium enrichment in Iran. For a monumental film about the United States' nuclear history, that narrow focus is less forgivable. "Oppenheimer" also fails to correct the Smyth Report's near-exclusive focus on White male scientists, seemingly ignoring that 15 of the scientists working for the Manhattan Project were of African descent.

The film implies that postwar resistance to the atomic bomb emerged from J. Robert Oppenheimer's tormented soul, his leftist friends or perhaps even Albert Einstein. That is simply not correct. It was African American journalists such as Charles H. Loeb who first asked critical questions about the bomb and published reports from the blast zone, not highbrow physicists, who first raised the alarm. We owe the outrage of Japanese activists and survivors for the larger mobilization against the bomb.

Yet the most troubling absence in "Oppenheimer" is all the pain the bomb has caused. Viewers are spared from learning about the indigenous and African people who got cancers from uranium mining, or about local "downwinders" who suffered similar ailments after being exposed to the radioactive fallout from the test bomb in Alamogordo, N.M. We learn nothing about the impact the bombs had on the citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

"Oppenheimer" teaches us to forget, not to remember.

**Peder Anker**, New York

The writer is a professor at New York University, where he studies the history of science.

J. Robert Oppenheimer has been a hero of mine since my early twenties, when I was lucky enough to be mentored by a specialist in nuclear medicine who had known Oppenheimer. He told me stories about Oppenheimer that instilled a deep admiration in me, but also a horror at how shamefully he was treated by an ungrateful and paranoid country.

Energy Department National Laboratories carry the names of other high-profile physicists. The Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory at the University of California at Berkeley is named for cyclotron inventor and Nobel Prize winner Ernest O. Lawrence. Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory honors Enrico Fermi, who built the world's first nuclear reactor.

Now is the time to add "J. Robert Oppenheimer" to the "Los Alamos National Laboratory" name, and give him the credit that is overdue. After all, if Oppenheimer had not been so enamored with New Mexico, there would not even be a Los Alamos National Laboratory. Oppenheimer built a world-class laboratory from the ground up, personally recruiting the initial cohort of outstanding scientists and vital support staff. Adding Oppenheimer's name to the lab he created is a fitting way to honor the man and his legacy, and it is the least we can do as a nation. It's never too late to right a wrong.

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